Robert Schuman Centre

The New European Agencies

Agencies in British Government: Revolution or Evolution?

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RSC No. 96/51

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EUI Working Paper RSC No. 96/51

Rhodes: *The New European Agencies*
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EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE

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The Conference on *The New European Agencies* was held at the EUI on 1-2 March 1996 and directed by Yves Mény and Giandomenico Majone

EUI Working Paper **RSC** No. 96/51

BADIA FIESOLANA, SAN DOMENICO (FI)

Printed in Italy in October 1996
European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50016 San Domenico (FI)
Italy

Abstract

Administrative reform was an ever-present feature of British government policy since 1979. This paper focuses on one aspect of the changes; introducing agencies. It has four sections. Section 2 briefly describes the context of agencification, outlining the comprehensive nature of British administrative reform and the reasons for change. Section 3 describes management and structural reform paying special attention to agencies. Section 4 discusses the problems arising from that policy before I provide an overall assessment which stresses the incremental, not revolutionary, nature of British administrative reform.

Introduction[1]

The past fifteen years were a permanent revolution for the British civil service driven by the energy and commitment of the longest serving government this century. The government did not go away by losing either an election or its enthusiasm for reform. It displayed remarkable perseverance and Margaret Thatcher made no secret of her disdain bordering on outright hostility towards the civil service. Wright (1994, pp. 108-10) identifies five types of administrative reform in Western Europe: continuous adjustment; responses to specific political crises; pragmatic structural change; reform as its own cause; and comprehensive programmes. Although the British government is expert at inventing retrospective rationales for its administrative reforms, none the less the many and varied changes are linked by the consistent aims of pushing back the frontiers of the state and cutting public spending. So, as a starting-point, British administrative reform is distinct because it is comprehensive.

The Context of Changes.

The British government's programme can be broken down into seven broad parts:

- Introducing the minimalist state.
- Reasserting political authority.
- Improved monitoring and evaluation.
- Reforming public sector management.
- Reforming the structure.
- Democratising the public sector.
- Transforming the culture.

Briefly, British government sought to cut public expenditure and succeeded only in slowing the rate of increase. It cut the size of the civil service from 732,000 in 1979 to 533,350 at 1 April 1994, although part of the fall stems from reclassifications, not cuts. The fundamental expenditure review announced in February 1993 will not deliver significant cuts in public expenditure but it will cut the number of senior civil servants further.

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[1] This text is also an abbreviated version of Rhodes (1996: chapter 5). © R. A. W. Rhodes.

The government asserted its political authority by curbing the civil service unions, and cash limiting public sector pay. It also personalised, some say politicised, the appointment of top civil servants, showing a marked preference for 'can do' civil servants. Commentators fear a loss of 'institutionalised scepticism' (Plowden, 1994, p. 104).

Britain multiplied regulatory bodies[2] most notably for public utilities; revamped state audit bodies; increasingly employed management consultants for the '3Es' of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness; reformed the inspectorates to make them managerial; used performance indicators extensively, and strengthened Treasury control. We have witnessed 'the audit explosion' (Power, 1994).

I discuss the reform of public management and structure (agencies) in the next section.

It is grandiloquent to talk of democratising the public sector in one of the most secretive advanced industrial democracies but there have been some noteworthy reforms. The government introduced innovative equal opportunities programmes for women and ethnic minorities. There were also some minor but worthwhile improvements in open government, including improved access to information and publishing such constitutional documents as Questions of Procedure for Ministers.

The phrase 'transforming the culture' refers to the impact of managerialism on the Whitehall culture of a safe pair of hands, loyalty to the department and advising on policy. Some fear that managerialism, open competition for senior posts and employment contracts will erode the public service ethic. In response the government introduced a new civil service code of ethics covering the roles, duties and responsibilities of civil servants.

The pressures for change in Britain were common to Western Europe (see Wright 1994, pp. 104-8). Six factors fuelled administrative reform.

- Economic depression and fiscal pressures leading to budget deficits.
- The 'New Right's' ideological distrust of 'big government' and accompanying determination to redraw the boundaries of the state.
- Europeanisation which further increased regulation and introduced new administrative pressures (for example, regionalisation).

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[2] In the UK the term 'agencies' refers to the executive agencies of central departments. It does not encompass regulatory bodies such as the new EU agencies. The topic of regulation and the new regulatory bodies, especially for the public utilities, requires a separate paper.

- Public disenchantment with government performance which alleges that government does too much and what it does, doesn't work.
- International management fashions, especially the new public management (NPM).
- Information technology which made it easier to introduce NPM.

But if these pressures are common, why was the pace of change in Britain greater than elsewhere in Western Europe? Three factors were of overriding importance.

First, a defining characteristic of British government is its strong executive and Margaret Thatcher used her position to push through reform of the civil service. The phrase 'political will' is commonly used to explain the government's determination. 'Strong, directive, and above all persistent, executive leadership' is longer but more accurate.

Second, there are few constitutional constraints on that leadership, especially when the government has a large majority in parliament. Parliamentary sovereignty means that once the government decides on a change, it can use its parliamentary majority to pass legislation; there are no constitutional impediments. Also, central administrative reform in Britain does not require a statute, only the exercise of Crown Prerogative, or executive, powers.

Finally, the government evolved a clear ideological strategy to justify and 'sell' its various reform packages. It attacked big government and waste, used markets to create more individual choice and campaigned for the consumer. Under John Major, the rationale for reform became more elaborate. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) are the source of the phrase 'reinventing government' and they trumpet the era of 'entrepreneurial government'. British government cites their work to justify its policies (see, for example: Butler, 1993; Mottram, 1994; Waldegrave, 1993).[3]

Whatever the specific form of the rationale, one theme remains constant; to cut public spending. This imperative drove the search for management reform. Although a commonplace of the academic literature, it is worth stressing that administrative reform is always political. The Conservative government's determination to reform the civil service was rooted in the political decision to cut back government and its spending and to exert effective control over the administrative machine.

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[3] For a more detailed account of the changes see Rhodes, 1996: chapter 5. There is also an earlier account in Italian, see Dente and others, 1995.

So, this set of institutional, constitutional and political variables enabled the government to push its reforms through. The next section focuses on the management and structural reforms and I assess the changes and their problems in sections 4.

Management and Structural Reform

Waste was an anathema to the Thatcher government and stories abound about public sector profligacy; for example, experimental rats bred at £30 each when available commercially at £2 (see: Chapman, 1978; Hennessy, 1989). Such stories are often amusing but they are also important because they helped to fuel the drive to reform public management; commonly referred to as 'the new public management' (NPM). In Britain, NPM has two strands: managerialism; and the new institutional economics (Hood, 1991, p. 5).

Managerialism refers to introducing private sector management in the public sector. It stresses: hands-on, professional management; explicit standards and measures of performance; managing by results; value for money; and more recently closeness to the customer. The new institutional economics refers to introducing incentive structures (such as market competition) into public service provision. It stresses disaggregating bureaucracies; greater competition through contracting-out and quasi-markets; and consumer choice (for a more detailed discussion, see: Hood 1991; and Pollitt, 1993). Before 1988, managerialism was the dominant strand in Britain. After 1988, the ideas of the new institutional economics became a major source of innovation and of problems for managerial reforms.

Managerialism: Scrutinies to FMI

In May 1979, Margaret Thatcher appointed Sir Derek Rayner, managing director of Marks and Spencer to spearhead a drive for increased efficiency. The purposes of his efficiency scrutinies were 'action, not study':

> (a) to examine a specific policy, activity or function with a view to savings or increased effectiveness and to questioning all aspects of the work normally taken for granted; (b) to propose solutions to any problems identified and (c) to implement agreed solutions, or begin their implementation, within 12 months of the start of the scrutiny'. (The Scrutiny Programme: A Note of Guidance by Sir Derek Rayner, cited in Hennessy, 1989, p. 596.)

Estimates of the savings vary but Hennessy (1989, p. 598) suggests that, by December 1982 when Rayner returned to Marks & Spencer, 130 scrutinies saved £170 million and 16,000 jobs a year and by 1988, some 300 scrutinies saved over £1 billion.

As 'Rayner's Raiders' scoured Whitehall for savings, they visited Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State at the Department of the Environment (DoE). Unusually for a minister, he was interested in management and redesigning the Whitehall machine. When he arrived at the DoE, he could not find out who was responsible for what and so, in 1979, he introduced a study of the information needs of ministers as a Rayner scrutiny. His management revolution was MINIS, or management information system for ministers, and it provides ministers with systematic information on the activities of the Department. He also used it to cut staff and measure effectiveness A second Rayner scrutiny, conducted by Christopher Joubert in 1981, divided the DoE into 120 cost centres. Each centre had an annual budget and an information system which told managers how they were doing. Enthusiastic about his new system, Michael Heseltine lectured Cabinet on the virtues of MINIS. The response was underwhelming, but he had the support of both the prime minister and the Treasury and the managerial revolution was not to be denied. The scrutinies mutated into the Efficiency Unit under Sir Robin Ibbs, and MINIS mutated into the Financial Management Initiative (FMI) via the Treasury and its preference for improved financial delegation and financial control over management information.

Launched in May 1982, FMI aimed:

> to promote in each department an organisation and system in which managers at all levels have:
>
> (a) a clear view of their objectives and means to assess and, wherever possible, measure outputs or performance in relation to those objectives;
>
> (b) well-defined responsibility for making best use of their resources, including a critical scrutiny of output and value for money; and
>
> (c) the information (particularly about costs), the training and the access to expert advice that they need to exercise their responsibilities effectively. (Cmnd 8616, 1982, para. 13)

Andrew Gray and his colleagues (1991, pp. 56-8) conclude that FMI institutionalised cost awareness in the civil service but its implementation was patchy because departments' tasks and contexts vary. Middle and lower management give the new system only qualified support because they have to marry their new 'freedom' to manage with centralised Treasury control. For its successful implementation, FMI needed strong political support but, in the forceful language of Sir Frank Cooper: 'I regard the minister-as-manager as nonsense. Ministers are not interested. It's not part of the ministerial stock-in-trade' (quoted in Hennessy, 1989, p. 609). Equally, FMI needed a strong lead from permanent secretaries who got to the top because of their policy, not their management, skills. In short, there was some change, but not a lot, and it

depended on whether FMI was a useful means to political ends (for a more detailed assessment, see: Zifcak, 1994; and Gray and others, 1991).

The Efficiency Unit's (1988) report on the achievements of FMI, colloquially known as 'The Next Steps', confirmed this pessimistic assessment. Begun in Autumn 1986, completed in May 1987, but delayed until February 1988 because its conclusions were potentially embarrassing with a general election pending. The report concluded the managerial revolution was only skin-deep and recommended introducing agencies to carry out the executive functions of government and bring about real financial and managerial decentralisation. Agencies were a response to the failure of managerialism, heralding a new era in which the government sought to reinvent British public administration.

The New Institutional Economics

The second wave of administrative reform was more radical. Although the Fulton Report (Cmnd 3638, 1968) anticipated agencies with its proposals to 'hive-off' blocs of work, the next wave of reform distinctively drew ideas from the new institutional economics. It stressed not only bureaucratic disaggregation (or agencification) but also competition and using market mechanisms (most notably, the purchaser-provider split and market testing); and improving the quality of services (especially through citizen's charters and responsiveness the consumers).

Agencification

The central idea of 'The Next Steps' is agencification or creating semi-autonomous agencies responsible for operational management. The key notion is 'distance' from the central department so there is freedom to manage (Davies and Willman, 1991, p. 16). It is the classic doctrine in public administration of separating policy from administration. There is a general model. Each agency has a framework document which sets out its objectives and performance targets. The chief executive of the agency is not a permanent civil servant but on contract and most are appointed in an open competition. He or she is personally responsible to the minister for the agency's performance, but the minister remains accountable to parliament for policy. There is no blue-print. Agencies now cover a diverse group of organisations and increasingly they are developing their own ways of working.

Before setting up an agency four questions must be answered.

- Does the job need to be done at all (e.g. cuts)?
- Does the government have to be responsible for it (e.g. privatisation)?

- Does the government have to carry out the task itself (e.g. market testing)?

- Is the organisation properly structured and focused on the job to be done (e.g. agencification)?

Referred to as the 'Prior Options' test, these questions also mean that an existing agency can still be privatised (see: Cm 2627, p. 15; and Cabinet Office, 1994a, pp. 12 and 13) because agencies are reviewed every five years. Initially, agencies were an alternative to privatisation, not a step on the way (see: Margaret Thatcher's written answer in HC Deb. 24 October 1988, col. 14).

By April 1995, there were 109 agencies employing 67 per cent of the civil service (Cm 3164 1996, p. iii). The agencies are many and varied. A comprehensive description would be both long and tedious (see Cm 3164, 1996). Table 1 illustrates this variety, distinguishing between welfare services, public services, regulatory, production, consultancy and leisure agencies. It draws further distinctions between those agencies which are self-funding and those still dependent on the Treasury; and those agencies which are monopolies and those facing competition.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Reform will continue, incrementally. The Treasury and Civil Service Committee (TCSC 1994, HC 27-I, para. 210-11) called for an extension of the agency approach to policy work and for auditing such work. The Government response was cautious. It remained 'positive' about applying Next Steps principles to policy work and it noted that departments already evaluate their policies. It made no proposals for change (Cm 2748, pp. 34-5). A speech by Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State, the Rt. Hon Michael Heseltine, at the Civil Service College, 23 January 1996, on future administrative reform contained no major initiatives; he promised more of the same.

There are now two civil services; in the policy making core department and in the executive agencies (Cabinet Office, 1994, p. 7; TCSC, 1993, HC 390-I, pp. viii-ix). The British civil service was never unified, it always had federal qualities, but the distinction between policy and implementation becomes ever sharper and careers more distinct (Campbell and Wilson 1995: 300-301). Indeed, the Trosa Report commented that 'it was not sensible to continue with "two classes of people"' and recommended closing the 'cultural gap' between agencies and sponsoring departments.

There is some evidence the agencies are a success. Jenkins (1993, pp. 92-3) argues Next Steps has 'succeeded as a management innovation', altering

organisational cultures and delivering 'real improvements in service delivery'. In a similar vein, Ian Colville and his colleagues (1993, p. 562) suggest 'outsiders .. underestimate the amount of change taking place', 'its effects ... took time to work through'. Greer's (1994, p. 133) study of agencies in social security concludes existing data has 'shortcomings' but the outcome is 'promising'; for example, agencies achieve most of their targets.

Market Testing

The White Paper on Competing for Quality (Cm 1730, 1991) introduced 'market testing' or 'competition with outside suppliers to determine who is best able to provide a particular service on the basis of best long-term value for money'. In the early stages, market testing involves identifying blocks of work in agencies to put out to competitive tender. It is a way of comparing the costs of direct service provision by the agency with cost of provision by the private sectors. The White Paper set an ambitious target to review activities worth £1.5 billion in eighteen months ending in September 1993 and failed to meet it (for a detailed discussion see: Oughton, 1994; TCSC, 1994, Vol. II, pp. 159-64 and paras 1942-1987). More important, market testing conflicted with agencification; or in other words the new institutional economics conflicted with managerialism. Agency chief executives see it as the main problem:

> the aim doesn't appear to be about achieving improved results, but more about marketing testing as much as possible and as quickly as possible, almost as an end in itself, without consideration for the future of the Agency (chief executive cited in Cabinet Office, 1994a, p. 12).

Campbell and Wilson (1995: 243) reports that their respondents saw market testing as a 'betrayal of trust'. Staff now feel uncertain, threatened and unrewarded (Price Waterhouse, 1994, p. 3). The TCSC (HC 27-I, 1994, para. 195) concluded the market testing programme 'had not been conducted effectively by the Government' and needed 'a reduction in the level of central oversight'. Above all, it reasserts central control, especially Treasury control. Competing for Quality was a Treasury document and Jordan (1994, p. 32) concludes: 'If there is a turf battle going on between defenders of the agency approach and market testers, the tide of the battle appears in favour of the latter'.

Citizen's Charter

The White Paper on The Citizen's Charter (Cm 1599, 1991) was prime minister John Major's 'Big Idea'. The key objectives were to improve the quality of public services and provide better value for money. The Citizen's Charter contains six principles: published explicit standards; full and accurate information about running services; choice for the users of services; courteous and helpful service;

effective remedies; and efficient and economical delivery of services, many of which have been revised with higher standards (Cm 2540, 1994). Sir Robin Butler (1993, p. 402) describes the Citizen's Charter as 'the culmination of the movement to output measurement'. Consumer interests now dominate producer interests: 'people power'. It is a little early for such an assessment. Christopher Pollitt (1993, p. 187) is nearer the mark when he concludes that 'it is not so much a charter for citizen empowerment as managerialism with a human face' (and for another, early evaluation see: Doern, 1993).

Managerialism gave us '3Es'. The new institutional economics provides the intellectual rationale for a new unholy trinity: agencies, contracts and charters. Added together, they make a dramatic agenda for change in the British administrative landscape. But the three initiatives pull in different directions and Next Steps confronts some important problems.

Problems

It is too early to evaluate the success or failure of agencies with any certainty. Inevitably, this section is speculative, although I draw on the available evidence whenever possible. Undoubtedly, the government's reforms have the potential for far-reaching change in the civil service. This section discusses the extent and effects of those changes under the headings of: fragmentation; steering; accountability; disasters; and culture.

Fragmentation

The most obvious result of the new system is institutional fragmentation. Service delivery depends on linking organisations. Policy implementation becomes more difficult because policy has to be negotiated with more and more organisations (see, for example: Marsh and Rhodes, 1992). Organisational interdependence is common and the government faces the increasingly difficult task of steering interorganisational networks (Rhodes, 1996, chapter 3). The Swedish experience with agencies suggests fragmentation breeds independence. Fudge and Gustafsson (1989, p. 33) describe how Swedish agencies develop different cultures to the centre, leading to problems of communication, and reluctance by agencies to accept central guidelines.

Steering

Jenkins (1993, p. 94) argues the government did not strengthen strategic capacity with the other changes. Agencies work in a 'policy vacuum' and steering is 'through a system of crisis management and blame avoidance'. The core task for

differentiated institutional systems is to develop the capacity for steering and consensus. Thus, in Sweden, Fudge and Gustaffson (1989, p. 33) describe a lack of co-ordination, and confusion of roles, between central ministry and agency. Given that the 'Next Steps' agencies will develop a near monopoly of expertise in their policy area, given that policy often emerges from many small decisions, it is conceivable the agency tail will wag the departmental dog. British central departments experiment with strategic planning to counter this erosion of central capability. Sir Robin Butler (1993, p. 404) echoes these same concerns when he writes:

> it is essential that it does not reach the point where individual Departments and their Agencies become simply different unconnected elements in the overall public sector, with ... *no real working mechanisms for policy co-ordination*' (emphasis added).

The view from the agencies is different. They are less concerned about horizontal links between departments and more with their links to the core department. From the start, chief executives complained about central control and the lack of clarity over responsibility for decisions (Price Waterhouse, 1991). It remains unclear whether the sponsoring department imposes the framework agreement or it is a product of genuine negotiation. Both the Frazer and Trosa reports noted 'considerable frustration' over detailed interference in management both from the sponsoring departments and central departments, especially the Treasury (Cabinet Office, 1991, p. 20; and 1994a, p. 29; TCSC, 1994, HC 27-I paras 157-62). Agency chief executives still claim they have to be on their guard against departmental interference (Price Waterhouse, 1994, p. 8; see also: Massey, 1995, pp. 8-9). The brute fact is that 'I am a civil servant and cannot say no' (chief executive cited in Cabinet Office 1994a, p. 31). The sponsoring departments have not adapted to the new situation and still exercise too much detailed control over finance and personnel (Cabinet Office, 1994a, pp. 32, 34 and 42).

Disasters

According to Hood and Jackson (1991, pp. 16-24), the 'government's capacity to manufacture social disasters has increased greatly'. For example, they argue that NPM breaks up government organisations into separate units, creating barriers to communication between the units and incentives to distort and conceal information. The hands-off approach to business and relaxing regulations encourages lax enforcement and capture of the regulators. Employing executives on contract leads to a loss of bureaucratic experience. In sum, NPM contains the 'organisational ingredients' associated with 'socially created disasters'. The Public Accounts Committee (1994) provides numerous examples. For example, The Property Services Agency was supposed to invoice all departments for the work it did for them. Its financial system broke down. The PSA failed to recoup £65.6

million. The Wessex Regional Health Authority wasted at least £20 million on a regional information system. They also used a seconded IBM employee to advise them on the purchase of an IBM computer, without competition, and it cost £0.5-1.0 million more than it should have done. Hood and Jackson (1991) conclude that 'NPM could be a disaster waiting to happen'.

Accountability

Fragmentation erodes accountability because sheer institutional complexity obscures who is accountable to whom for what. The government confuses consumer responsiveness with political accountability. Responsive service delivery as envisaged by such innovations as The Citizen's Charter (Cm 1599) and the associated Code of Practice on Access to Government Information are welcome but they supplement, not replace, political accountability because the consumer has no powers to hold a government agency to account. This accountability 'gap' became wider with the advent of agencies because no new arrangements were introduced to preserve the constitutional convention of ministerial responsibility.

Waldegrave (1993, p. 20) tried to justify this inaction by drawing a distinction between 'responsibility, which can be delegated, and accountability, which remains firmly with the minister'.[4] On this view, agencies and the other reforms clarified responsibility but left 'the Minister properly accountable for the policies he settles'. In short, British government has undergone a significant decrease in political accountability. and the damage is compounded by the government's refusal to recognise there is a problem.

Most attention focuses on the constitutional convention of individual ministerial responsibility which states that ministers are accountable to parliament for all the actions of their department. To keep ministerial responsibility intact, the government distinguishes between policy and management. Responsibility (for management) can be delegated to agency chief executives. Accountability (for policy) remains with the minister. But this distinction hinges on clear definitions of both policy and management and of the respective roles and responsibilities of ministers, senior civil servants and chief executives. They do not exist:

> the appropriate accountability arrangements are not obvious because it is not always possible to clearly separate policy and management issues and some chief executives,

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[4] See also: the Cabinet Office memorandum to the Treasury and Civil Service Committee, 1994, Vol. II pp. 188-191 which takes casuistic circumlocution to impenetrable lengths. Truly, we have here a new theology.

> especially the ones from the private sector, are very conscious of being in what they consider to be a fairly precarious position. (Cabinet Office, 1994a, p. 24)

The government argues the reforms introduce greater 'transparency' in government without undermining the key constitutional principle of ministerial accountability (Cm. 2627, p. 16; and Massey, 1995, p. 25). The TCSC (1994, HC 27-I, para. 132) rejected the government's distinction between responsibility and accountability, noting the division of responsibilities was often unclear. Other critics are more pungent rejecting the government's views as 'superficial and complacent' (Plowden, 1984, p. 127; see also Davies and Willman, 1991, pp. 24-32; and Stewart's, 1993 critique of Waldegrave, 1993). As Jordan (1992, p. 13) points out 'There is a deliberate or accidental ambiguity' between 'accountability *to* the Minister by the chief executive' and 'accountability *of* the Minister to the House of Commons'. (See also: Greer, 1994, chapter 6; and Bogdanor, 1993).

The ambiguity matters. In theory, chief executives are responsible for policy implementation but '80 per cent ... claim to have a policy input - despite the 'Next Steps' emphasis on their role of delivering a service rather than policy formulation' (Price Waterhouse, 1994, pp. 7-8). 'The chief executive of the Prison Service is the government's principal adviser on prisons policy' (Plowden, 1994, p. 128). The current arrangement allows the minister to take the credit when the policy goes well but to blame the chief executive when things go wrong; 'the separation of policy and management is advantageous to those on the policy side, and disadvantageous to managers' (Davies and Willman, 1991, p. 34). There is no shortage of examples. The unpopularity of the government's policy of absent father's paying child support is part of any explanation of Ros Hepplewhite's resignation as chief executive of the Child Support Agency. The Home Secretary, Michael Howard, sacked Derek Lewis, chief executive of the Prison Service, who complained bitterly the Home Secretary 'invented a new definition of the word "operational" which meant "difficult"'. He commented that Howard's attempt to 'use the distinction between policy and operation was no more than a political fig leaf which was so small as to be grossly indecent' (cited in Barker 1996:19). He sued for wrongful dismissal. The Home Office paid contractual compensation but did not admit Lewis was wrongfully dismissed. In sum, there is no clear dividing line between policy and operations, undermining ministerial accountability to parliament by helping ministers avoid blame.

Parliament has not seized the opportunities created by Next Steps to improve its scrutiny of government departments. Giddings (1995, p. 226) argues parliamentary scrutiny of Next Steps was 'at best fragmentary and episodic'. There is a radical interpretation of Next Steps which foresees direct links between parliament and agencies. The chief executive of an agency is often, but not invariably, the accounting officer. He or she will appear before select committees

of parliament to answer questions within the Osmotherly rules which confine civil servants and chief executives to questions of fact, ruling out any discussion of the merits of policy or advice given to ministers (Civil Service Department, 1980). Unfortunately, these 'innovations' do not add up to a direct accountability link between agencies and parliament. Pyper (1995, p.30) suggests that in ten years we may have either an 'accountability gap 'which eases 'buck passing' or a 'crab-like step' towards improved accountability. Now we have incremental change in an unknown direction!

Administrative culture

Managerialism and the '3Es' are a challenge to the culture of Whitehall. The '3Cs' is a shorthand way of referring to the erosion of traditional civil service values. It refers to: conduct; code of ethics; and culture.

Sexual and financial scandals involving ministers are great fun but perhaps less important than other forms of conduct; for example, ministers misleading parliament (Ponting, 1985); using civil servants for 'inappropriate' party political work (Plowden, 1994, p. 109); waste of public money (Public Accounts Committee, 1994, Annex 2); declining standards in public life (Cm 2850 1995) and abuse of power (Scott, 1996). So, interest in a code of ethics grew. The TCSC (1994, para. 101-7 and pp. cxxvi-cxxvii) proposed such a code with an independent appeal to the Civil Service Commissioners (para. 108-12). The government responded promptly with a code (Cm 2748, 1995, pp. 5-6 and Annex pp. 43-5). The Nolan Committee (Cm 2850 1995) sought to toughen the proposed code by, for example, protecting the civil service from politicisation. The government accepted its proposals.

Of most concern here is the civil service culture which blends such values as honesty, loyalty, impartiality, propriety and a respect for intelligence with conservatism, scepticism, elitism and arrogance (see: Butler, 1993, p. 8; and Plowden, 1994, pp. 21-3 and 74). Managerialism, open competition, impropriety and macho-ministers add up to a dilution of this culture or ethos. The skills of the civil service have also been downgraded for those of business management.

Specific event dramatise these fears. In the summer of 1992, Sir Peter Kemp was 'retired' as project manager of Next Steps by the new Minister of Public Service and Science, William Waldegrave. In spring 1993, Mr Derek Lewis became the chief executive of the new agency for the Prison Service. His appointment was controversial because he was not a civil servant nor the first choice of the selectors who preferred the serving civil servant. The (then) Home Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, chose Mr Lewis because of his support for competition and contracting-out. And, of course, he was subsequently fired. These examples

illustrate the possible 'end' of the permanent, career civil servant but it is too early to read the rites over the senior civil service. The Oughton Report's (Efficiency Unit, 1993, p. 108) survey of civil servants reports there is 'a belief the public service ethos is being eroded'. Wilson (1991, p. 335) reports only 16 per cent of his sample of civil servants mentioning 'articulating long-term interests' among their sources of job satisfaction. The Association of First Division Civil Servants (FDA) focuses on protecting its members from ministers and has dropped its concern with the public interest (Plowden, 1994, p. 117). MORI polled 1900 FDA members about work and change in the civil service (response rate 54%). The survey reported a high level of dissatisfaction. More than 80% of respondents thought that reform was badly managed and undermining unity of the civil service. 85% wanted a code of ethics. (For full details of the survey see: British Public Opinion, August, 1995, pp. 3-4.) Others are more sceptical about the erosion of the public service ethos; for example, Sir Peter Kemp doubts this revolution has reached the senior civil service (Kemp, 1994; Greenaway, 1995). The 'glue' still holds (see the quotations from senior civil servants in Plowden 1994, p. 71). Departments are 'still managed by people who got there because of their policy skills rather than their management skills' (Watson, 1992, p. 27). The litmus test will be the response to the White Paper, The Civil Service: Continuity and Change (Cm 2627, 1994), especially its proposals for open competition and written employment contracts for the senior civil service. Many commentators hedge their bets and suggest the jury is still out (see, for example: Jenkins, 1993).

Conclusions: Assessing Change

For many commentators, managerialism and agencies have had a significant impact on the public service culture of the civil service but it is easy to exaggerate the degree to which British government has changed and now works along similar lines to private business. For example, Wright (1994, p. 123) argues the state, compared with the early 1980s 'is becoming': more defined; more diminished; more decremental; more divided; more disaggregated; more distant; more deregulated; more denationalised; more defensive and demoralised; and more disoriented; but then warns against exaggeration! Conversely, Sue Richards notes how much has not changed, itemising: 'fast stream' recruitment; ministerial accountability; the permanent secretary as sole accounting officer; the policy function; senior appointment procedures; and the delegation of pay and conditions of work to agencies (TCSC, 1993, HC 390-II, p. 278). It may be a cliché but it remains essential to distinguish carefully between the rhetoric and the reality of administrative reform.

So, British government is trying to reinvent itself but is its revolution transforming the centre? There are two possible answers. First, we have been here before. Thus, William Robson's (1962, Ch. 6 and pp. xvi-xviii) discussion of public ownership identifies 'the twilight zone' between government power and managerial freedom in which Ministers exercise private influence and reach 'informal understandings' as a key problem. One conclusion is, therefore, that Next Steps simply reinvents the relationship between the sponsoring ministry and its nationalised industries. It never proved possible to identify a limit to ministerial influence or to draw a clear line between the responsibilities of minister and the industry's Board. The relationship remained bedevilled by a fatal ambiguity. For agencies this fate remains possible.

The second answer accepts the government has embarked on an exciting experiment to create different ways of delivering services. However, a policy experiment needs systematic learning: that is, it must produce information so the policy makers can identify and correct errors. The current programme of reform is not so designed. Also, change follows change with such speed that systematic assessment is impossible. This design fault is important, given the problems already identified. Contingency theory tells us there is no one best way to design organisational structure; it depends on the fit between organisation and environment. So the agency model will not fit all organisations; for example, 'agencies' in a politicised environment (social security) will have a different organisational structure and pattern of managerial behaviour to 'agencies' with routinised tasks and stable environments (vehicle licensing). So, some agencies will fail. Evaluation could tell us which ones and why. It is unlikely organisational design can be reduced to the agency formula. Fittingly, Sir Robin Butler described the reforms as a journey to an unknown destination (Butler 1993, p. 406). How then will the government change its course in response to the problems thrown up by reinventing government? What will British government look like a decade from today?

At the heart of any future policy evaluation is the relationship between sponsoring and central departments and agencies. The core assumption of the experiment is 'distance'; separating policy and management.[5] It is possible 'distance' could characterise the relationship between department and agency. Agencies could become independent as in the Swedish case. However, it is currently more plausible to suggest the sponsoring departments have not

[5] I use the term 'distance' deliberately. The term 'decentralisation' refers to the transfer of power to lower levels within a bureaucratic or territorial hierarchy (see, Rhodes, 1992, pp. 317-19). For UK agencies the question of whether there is a transfer of power remains unclear and should be determined by empirical research, not by definition.

adapted to their new strategic role and, instead, duplicate agency functions. The oversight of central departments remains detailed. Agency chief executives provide policy advice. There is evidence supporting this limited change version of events. Even commentators who stress the achievements of Next Steps want to give the agencies more independence (Massey, 1995, pp. 12-13). However, existing studies relied either on questionnaires or on semi-structured elite interviews. There are no case studies of the dynamics of the relationship. We know nothing about the informal understandings and the indirect influence which so characterised relationships with nationalised industries, although some witnesses to the TCSC (1993, HC 390-II, para. 800) already talk of a 'complicity' between the two. At best, Next Steps is an 'evolutionary revolution' (Greer, 1994, p. 132) and many commentators echo this assessment. Perhaps more important, Jenkins (1993, p. 95) suggests that recent reforms reflect an enduring conflict between the old politics of central control and a new model of management promoting entrepreneurial behaviour.

The government pushed through its reforms with opposition restricted to the professional-bureaucratic policy networks and focused on policy implementation. All governments suffer from both 'implementation gaps' and 'unintended consequences' (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992, pp. 182-6; Rhodes, 1996, chapters 1 and 3) and the Conservative government's reforms of the civil service were no exception. Incremental change continues to typify British administrative reform. These reforms have the potential to transform the British centre, but that potential remains to be realised.

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TABLE 1: Types of UK Agencies

Type		**Agencies** (examples)
NOT SELF FUNDING Monopoly	WELFARE SERVICES	Employment Benefits Agency Child Support Agency
	PUBLIC SERVICE	Meteorological Office Ordnance Survey
SELF-FUNDING Monopoly	REGULATORY	Land Registry Vehicle Inspectorate
	PRODUCTION	The Royal Mint HMSO
Not Monopoly	RESEARCH AND CONSULTANCY To Government Departments and other agencies	Civil Service College Central Office of Information
	To Government Departments and agencies and private sector	Building Research
	LEISURE	Historic Royal Palaces

Modified from Greer, 1992, pp. 92-3; and Cm 3164 1996.

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